DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 461 SO 012 963

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TITLE Willingness to Request Help from Others: Effects of Mode of Interaction and Size of Request.
PUB DATE Aug 80
NOTE 19p.: Paper presented at Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association (New York, NY, August, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education: *Interaction: Social Psychology: Social Science Research: *Student Attitudes: *Undergraduate Students
IDENTIFIERS *Help Seeking

ABSTRACT

This study investigated the willingness of persons to ask others for help. It examined the effect of modes of interaction (asking for help by letter, phone, or in person) and the size of the request (whether they asked for a small or large favor). The sample consisted of 96 male and female undergraduates in introductory sociology classes. The students were told that the experiment consisted of determining whether a special type of person agrees to help others without receiving anything in return. Participants were instructed to ask other students for help by letter, phone, or in person: for each person from whom they requested help, they could earn 20 cents. Results indicated that the mode of interaction is an important factor in persons' willingness to request help. Participants were most willing to do so by writing, less willing by phone, and least willing in person. Also, the effect of the mode of interaction was related to the size of the request. When the request was small, subjects were as likely to make the request by phone as in writing. When the request was large, subjects were as unwilling to make the request by phone as in person. (Author/KC)

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# WILLINGNESS TO REQUEST HELP FROM OTHERS: EFFECTS OF MODE OF INTERACTION AND SIZE OF REQUEST

SO 012 963

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Paper presented at the American Sociological Association Annual meetings, August 1980, New York.

## ABSTRACT

Asking for help can often be an uncomfortable experience which persons avoid. Ninety-six male and female undergraduates were given an opportunity to earn money by making request for help from others. Subjects were most willing to request help when the request was to be made in writing, less willing to ask for help when the request was to be made by phone, and least willing to ask for help when the request was to be made in person. The effect was qualified by an interaction between the mode of interaction and the size of the request to be made. When a large request was to be made, subjects were unwilling to do so either by phone or in person. When a small request was to be made, subjects were unwilling to do so in person but willing to do so by phone or in writing. The results support the view that mode of interaction is an important factor in persons' willingness to request help from others.

# WILLINGNESS TO REQUEST HELP FROM OTHERS: EFFECTS OF MODE OF INTERACTION AND SIZE OF REQUEST

Asking for help, like being asked for help, can be an uncomfortable and upsetting experience. Persons who ask others for help may suffer embarassment, loss of public and/or private esteem, may be refused help, and may become indebted to the helper. These negative features of asking for help may overcome the positive features and persons may not seek help. Previous studies have found that when situational factors produce high levels of these negative features persons are often deterred from asking for help (Broll, et. al, 1974; Castro, 1974; Greenberg and Shapiro, 1971; Morris and Rosen, 1973; Shapiro, 1978; Stokes and Bickman, 1974; Wallston, 1976).

In situations where persons may experience discomfort, the closer the interaction the greater the discomfort persons experience (Middlemist, et. al., 1976), and the more they will attempt to avoid the situation. Pancer, et. al., (1974) found that to avoid appeals for help, persons will walk greater distances than normal. Furthermore, this was greater when the request for help involved greater discomfort.

Since asking for help may involve discomfort, we would expect persons to be more reluctant to request help the closer the interaction involved in making the request. The closeness of interaction may involve physical distance or, as in this study, the mode of interaction. Interactions in which persons interact in person are closer than when persons interact by telephone and interactions where persons interact by writing involve even a more distant mode of interaction. Therefore, since asking others for help may involve feelings of discomfort, persons should be more willing to make a request for help by writing

than by phone, and persons should be least willing to ask for help in person. These effects of mode of interaction may also be related to situational factors which affect the amount of discomfort produced by asking another for help. In situations where potential discomfort would be high, the effects of mode of interaction should be greater than in situations where potential discomfort would be lower.

One variable which might affect the amount of potential discomfort and, therefore, the willingness to ask for help, is the size of the request for help which is to be made. Asking for a large favor involves greater likelihood of being refused and as Blau (1955) notes, being refused after asking for help is especially upsetting. Furthermore, asking for a large favor may result in greater indebtedness and, therefore, more discomfort. Persons should then be less willing to make a large rather than a small request for help.

Whether persons are asking for help for themselves or for others is another variable which might affect discomfort and, therefore, willingness to ask for help. Persons asking for help for others might find it less embarassing and involve less loss of esteem than those asking for help for themselves.

In summary, this study investigated the willingness of person to ask others for help. It is hypothesized that willingness to ask others for help will be less when asking for large rather than small favors and when the request for help is made for oneself rather than for others. It is also hypothesized that persons will be less willing to ask for help in person than by phone and most willing to do so in writing. Furthermore, it is hypothesized that the effects of mode of interaction will be greater when making large requests and when the request is for oneself.

## METHOD

The subjects for this study were 96 male and female undergraduates[1] from Introductory Sociology courses who had earlier indicated interest in learning about and participating in social research. Subjects were randomly assigned to one of the experimental conditions produced by the 3 x 2 x 2 design. Subjects participated in groups of three, four, or five.

When subjects came to the research office, they were met by a female experimenter. The experimenter told them that they would hear a description of a current research project and would be given an opportunity to participate in the research project, if they wished. The experimenter told the subjects that previous research had determined that the majority of charitable donations were made by a small minority of people. Therefore, the current research was concerned with determining if there was a special type of person who agrees to help others without receiving anything in return. Subjects were told that information had been obtained about a large number of students. These students were to be contacted and asked for some type of help. The research project would then look at characteristics of those students who agreed to help and characteristics of those students who did not agree to help.

Subjects were then informed how they might participate in the research. If they wished, they could contact these students and ask them for help. For each person they requested help from, they would earn 20 cents. They were then told how they would have to contact the students (by writing letters, by phone, or in person); the type of request (large or small); and the stated beneficiary of the request (themselves or others). Subjects were also told that based upon previous efforts, they would be able to contact about 12 people per hour and, thus, earn about $2.40 an hour. Depending upon the mode of interaction condition, this time estimate was stated to include writing, addressing, stuffing and stamping

letters (writing conditions) or including the actual requests for help as well as the time involved in trying to contact those students who were not in their rooms (phone and in person conditions).

Subject were then given the opportunity to indicate whether they wished to participate in the research. Afterwards, they were asked to complete a short questionnaire. Subjects were then questioned for signs of suspicion (none was found) and debriefed.

Independent variables

Mode of interaction: writing, phone, in person: In the writing condition, subjects were told they would have to come to the research office where they would be given a list of students to contact. They would hand write letters to these students asking them to provide help. The experimenter explained that the subjects would sign their own names to the letters. In addition to the letter requesting help, subjects would also write and enclose postcards so that the person being contacted could indicate whether they would agree to help. These postcards would be addressed with the subjects name and the address of the research office. Subjects were told that they would be notified of how many of the people they contacted had agreed to help.

In the phone condition, subjects were told that they would have to come to the research office where they would be given a list of students to contact. They would call these people on the telephone asking them to provide help. The experimenter explained that if the person they contacted agreed to help, they were to state that they were just gathering names of people who would help and the person would be contacted again to make the actual arrangements.

In the in person condition, subjects were told that they would be given a list of students from a dormitory other than their own. They would go to this dormitory, knock on persons' doors, and ask them to provide help. As in

the phone condition, the experimenter explained that if the persons agreed to help they should state that they were just gathering names of people who would help and the person would be contacted again to make the actual arrangements.

Size of request: large or small: In the large request condition, subjects were to ask if the person would spend an hour at the student union cafeteria observing and recording food purchasing behavior. In the small request condition, subjects were to ask if the person would answer a few questions about their food preferences.

Stated beneficiary of the request: self or others: In the self benefiting condition, subjects were to say that the reason they were asking for help was because they needed the information for a term paper they were writing. In the other benefiting condition, subjects were to say that the reason for the request was that the state health society needed the information.

Dependent variable

The major dependent variable was whether subjects agreed to ask others for help. Every effort was made to make this decision as realistic and meaningful as possible. Before subjects indicated whether they wished to participate in requesting help form others, it was stressed that if they agreed to participate they would be held to their decision. They were told that if they were uncertain if they wished to or could participate, they should not agree to do so. They were shown a calender with days and times listed when they could make their requests. In this way the dependent variable in this study, willingness to request help, was made to be a behavioroid dependent variable (Aronson and Carlsmith, 1968).

After this, subjects were given a form on which they could indicate whether or not they would participate by requesting help from others. If they agreed to do so, they were also asked to indicate how many people they

would ask. Subjects were told this form was being used, rather than oral responses, to avoid their being influenced by or influencing the others (subjects) present. It was stated that this form would also provide a written record of their decision. Subjects then completed and signed these forms.

## RESULTS

The effects of the three independent variables on subjects' willingness to ask others for help were analysed using analyses of variance.[2] As hypothesized, mode of interaction effected willingness to ask others for help, $F(2,84) = 21.5$, $p < .001$. Subjects were least likely to agree to ask others in person (3.1%), more likely to ask by phone (37.5%), and most willing to ask by writing letters (65.6%).[3] This main effect was qualified, however, by the hypothesized interaction between mode of interaction and size of the request, $F(2,84) = 9.2$, $p < .001$. As shown in Table 1, when the request to be made was large, subjects were less willing to ask by phone or in person than by writing. When the request was to be small, subjects were as willing to ask by phone as by writing but less willing to ask in person than by phone. Those subjects who would be making large request by writing were most likely to agree to make requests.

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TABLE 1

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Whether the request was to be made for the benefit of the requester or others had no significant effect on willingness to ask for help. Neither the main effect, $F(1,84) = 0.3$, $p > .50$, nor any of the interactions, all $F$'s $< 1.5$, $p$'s $> .25$, were significant. When the help was to be for the requester, 37.5% of subjects agreed to ask. When the request was to be for others, 33.3% of subjects agreed to help.

The data were also analysed using Goodman's (1972) log linear chi square technique. The pattern of results was the same as for the analyses of variance. The main effect of mode of interaction was significant (likelihood ratio $X^2(2) = 32.43$, $p < .001$). However, it was qualified by the interaction between mode of interaction and size of request (likelihood ratio $X^2(2) = 13.58$, $p < .005$). None of the other main effects or interactions were significant (all $p$'s > .30).

The effect of the independent variables on number of people subjects agreed to ask was also analysed. Because of the extreme hetrogeneity of variances in experimental conditions, a square root transformation was used before the analysis of variance. (Snedecor and Cochran, 1967). The results of this analysis were generally similar to that for the subjects' willingness to participate by asking for help. Mode of interaction signi ically affected the number of people subjects agreed to ask, $F(2,84) = 17.2$, $p < .001$. There was also a significant interaction between mode of interaction and size of request, $F(2,84) = 5.0$, $p < .01$. The non-transformed means in this interaction are shown in Table 2. When the request was to be large, subjects were willing to contact more persons by writing than by phone or in person. When the request was to be small, subjects agreed to contact as many people by phone as by writing, but were willing to contact fewer in person. The only difference between the results for willingness to ask for help and the number of people subjects agreed to help was that for the number of people subjects agreed to ask, the difference between subjects in the small and large request by phone conditions was not significant at the .05 level.

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TABLE 2

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The stated beneficiary of the request to be made had no significant effects on the number of people subjects agreed to ask. Neither the main effect, $F(1,84) < 1$, $p > .5$, nor interactions, all F's < 1, were significant.

After subjects indicated whether they would participate, and if so, how many people they would make requests to, they were asked to fill out a short questionnaire. All subjects, regardless of their decision to request help or not, completed this questionnaire. Subjects were asked to indicate how they thought they would feel when making the requests for help. Subjects responded on 9 point scales for 10 pairs of adjectives. Their responses were factor analysed using varimax rotation which produced a factor indicating uncomfortableness when making the requests. This factor contained four adjective pairs; uncomfortable-comfortable, self-conscious - at ease, constrained - free, and embarassed - unembarassed. Each pair loaded above .60 on the factor. A discomfort scale was then constructed from subjects' responses on those four items.

Both mode of interaction, $F(2,84) = 5.3$, $p < .01$, and size of request, $F(1,84) = 4.3$, $p < .01$, effected subjects' reports on the discomfort they felt they would experience when making the requests for help. Subjects reported that they felt they would experience less discomfort in asking for help by writing letters ($\bar{x} = 23.4$) than by either phone ($\bar{x} = 18.2$) or in person ($\bar{x} = 19.1$). Subjects also reported that they felt that asking for a small favor would produce less discomfort ($\bar{x} = 18.8$) than in asking for a large favor ($\bar{x} = 21.7$).

Subjects were also asked how many people, who were asked, would agree to help. Both mode of interaction, $F(2,84) = 3.7$, $p < .05$, and size of request, $F(1,84) = 133.8$, $p < .001$, affected their perceptions. Subjects felt that persons being asked for a large favor would be less willing to help ($\bar{x} = 7.7$) than those asked for a small favor ($\bar{x} = 3.5$). They also felt that persons being asked by phone ($\bar{x} = 5.1$) or in person ($\bar{x} = 5.3$) would be more likely to agree to help than those being asked by letter ($\bar{x} = 6.2$).

Subjects were also asked how important they felt the study was, and how important it was that people who were asked for help agreed to do so. Their

responses were combined into a single measure of perceived importance of the requests for help. Mode of interaction, $F(2,84) = 3.7$, $p < .05$, had a significant effect on their perceptions, and there was also a significant interaction between mode of interaction and size of request, $F(2,84) = 3.4$, $p < .05$. A test of cell means found that the only cell mean significantly different from others was the importance reported by subjects in the large request writing letters condition. These subjects felt that their requesting help was more important than did subjects in the other experimental conditions.

The questionnaire also included questions asking the subjects to indicate how difficult, how convenient, and how much effort it would be in making the requests for help. The responses to these three questions were combined into a single scale. Neither mode of interaction, $F(2,84) = 1.1$, $p > .3$, nor either of the other independent variables had any significant effects on subjects responses all $p$'s $> .2$.

## DISCUSSION

The results of this study indicate that mode of interaction is an important factor in persons' willingness to request help. As hypothesized, persons were most willing to do so by writing, less willing to do so by phone, and least willing to do so in person. Also as expected, the effect of mode of interaction was related to the size of the request. When the request was to be small, subjects were as likely to make the request by phone as in writing. When the request was to be large, subjects were as unwilling to make the request by phone as in person.

These results may be partially accounted for by the discomfort subjects reported they felt they would experience in making the requests. Subjects felt that making a large request would produce more discomfort than making a small one. Subjects also stated that making the request in writing would

produce less discomfort than in making the request by phone or in person. Despite the fact that persons were less willing to make a request for help in person than by phone, subjects reported they would experience as much discomfort when asking by phone as when asking in person.

This lack of significant differences between reported discomfort to be experienced in requesting help by phone or in person might be due to a process of self-rationalization or impression management. Only 1 of the 32 subjects in the in person condition agreed to make the requests for help. They may have wished to believe or to report to the experimenter that the reasons they did not agree to make the requests was due less to avoidance of potential discomfort than to the press of other activities. Subjects in the in person condition then may have felt or reported they felt that they would have experienced less discomfort in making the requests than they actually would. In support of this explanation were responses of subjects who were asked during the debriefing why they had not agreed to make the requests. Subjects usually responded they had tests or papers coming up or would be busy in other ways. Seldom did anyone report to the experimenter they they would have felt uncomfortable in asking others for help.

The large number of subjects who agreed to make requests for help in the writing letter - large request condition was probably due to the greater importance subjects in this condition attached to their help requesting activity. This serves as a reminder that in addition to considering the negative features of asking for help, the positive features should also be considered. In this study, an attempt was made to control for the positive features of asking for help by stating to the subjects that they would be paid 20¢ for each person contacted regardless of whether the person agreed to help. However, persons may experience positive features of asking for help other than the value of the help to be received.

In this study, whether persons were to ask for help for themselves or for others did not effect the subjects' willingness to agree to ask for help. This may have been due to the subjects knowing that the actual reason for the request was not to receive help benefiting themselves or others. In situations where persons would be requesting help which actually would benefit themselves or others, this factor might effect requests for help.

An interesting implication of the results of this study is that in asking for help from others, the mode of interaction, asking in person, which results in the greatest agreement to help is the mode of interaction which persons are least willing to use. Similarly, the mode of interaction, writing letters, which results in the least agreements to help is the mode of interaction which persons are most willing to use in making requests.

TABLE 1

Subjects willing to ask others for help by mode of interaction and size of request.

| Mode of Interaction | Size of Request | |
|---|---|---|
| | Small | Large |
| Writing letter | 7 (44%) | 14 (88%) |
| Phone | 9 (56%) | 3 (19%) |
| In Person | 1 (6%) | 0 (0%) |

N = 16 per condition

TABLE 2

Average number of people subjects agreed to ask by mode of interaction and size of requests.

| Mode of Interaction | Size of Request | |
|---|---|---|
| | Small | Large |
| Writing letter | 19.0 | 40.6 |
| Phone | 16.3 | 9.9 |
| In Person | 1.6 | 0.0 |

N = 16 per condition

## Footnotes

[1]Sex was included as a fourth independent variable. Like Greenberg and Shapiro (1971) and Morris and Rosen (1973) sex had no effect on asking others for help. Therefore male and female subjects were grouped together and no further mention of sex of subjects is made.

[2]The use of analysis of variance with a dichotomous dependent variable is discussed by Lunney (1970). He has shown that with a fixed effect model and equal cell size, analysis of variance and the use of the F - table are appropriate with a dichotomous dependent variable if there are 20 df for the error term when the smallest proportion of the dependent variable is greater than .20 or if there are 40 df when the proportion is less than .20.

Dunlap (Note 1) compared the use of the F-test and the $x^2$ test with binomial data and concluded that they produce nearly identical results at the $x^2$ = .05 level. At more stringent $x^2$ levels, the F-test produces too many Type I errors and the $x^2$ test becomes more conservative the greater number of groups. Dunlap concluded that there is no substantial reason why the F-test should not be used in situations where the $x^2$ test would normally be used.

[3]Duncan multiple range tests were used to test differences between cell means. Significant differences were significant at the .05 level or beyond.

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